

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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DEAR MEMBER,

A recent visit to Winchester Cathedral brought the Christian News-Letter to mind. In the nave still stand the small chantries—tiny roofed chapels nestling at the foot of the pillars—each dedicated to some mediaeval worthy. Only one retains its original completion of gilded boss and carved foliage: that of William of Wykeham. All the rest were more or less despoiled by the riots of Cromwell's day. The story goes that the mob had brought to confusion every praying place and chantry and were gathered to despoil this last, only to discover one of their own officers guarding, with drawn sword, William's shrine. The man was a Wykehamist, apprehended in the main of Cromwell's cause yet equally convinced that ancient things had power. "Strangled by his old school tie"—or its Cromwellian equivalent—may well have been the comment of many in the mob: but the majority must have understood. The place was saved.

THE CHURCH AS THE REDEEMED COMMUNITY

The Christian News-Letter is not unlike that man: prepared to mill around with radical ideas and yet retain the Faith as integral to any future. And so should be its readers.

In a previous war it was the present writer's duty to be a scout officer in open warfare, his place with the connecting file midway between the scouts in front and the main body to the rear. If at the end of a day's march the pencilled vituperations from his scouts (accusing him of too slow cowardice) equalled in number the typed exasperations of Brigade Headquarters (accusing him of too quick rashness) he used to conclude that he must after all have been roughly in the right place. No doubt the editor of this broadsheet will be the first to recognise the simile.

The midway house that stands between the "schools" and the "market-place" is, for any day of transition, an essential structure whose occupancy is as exasperating as it is rewarding: and the only conceivable reason for a member of the Iona Community being called momentarily to occupy the editor's chair must be that the Community seeks in however small a way to incarnate this aspect of the News-Letter's job. For three months each year ministers and laity live together on the Island engaged on a common task that realistically we may plot the rebuilding of our spiritual purposes for a changing day, and for the rest of the year assist in such actual experiments on the mainland as emerge as feasible. What we plot in our laboratory school we seek to fashion in the market place. Nor are we ashamed to mill around with radical ideas still captive to an ancient Faith. And—to have done with the similes—our post bag, like that of your editor, is equally filled with the pencilled notes of "new communities" out on the frontier assuring us that we should separate from the main body altogether, and with more formal reminders from the Church as she is that we are too quick in our advances.¹

It is from such vantage point that this week we seek to share with scouts and main body alike three actual mainland experiments in which the Community has some continuing part: pleading alike our awareness that similar things are being better done elsewhere and our hope that their number increase.

AN EXPERIMENT IN OECUMENICAL WITNESS

The first experiment is claimed as some response to the demand of the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State that the Church "can offer a convincing example in the

¹ *The Coracle*, the quarterly of the Iona Community, can be obtained by application to The Secretary, The Iona Community, Acheson House, Canongate, Edinburgh.

social and economic sphere only when it has set its own house in order." The opportunity paradoxically occurred in an area where its house had been set in complete disorder by two consecutive nights of heavy and intensive bombing : with this peculiar advantage that the geographical unity of the district assisted us in seeing the problem whole. A few minimum statistics are essential. One night a clearly defined industrial district of some forty thousand persons was continuing a comparatively uneventful existence served by sixteen ministers: ten belonging to the national Church, two to the Methodists, two to the Congregational, while the Episcopal Church and the Baptists had one each. Two nights later some ten thousand people were left in the district served by nine ministers: five of the national Church, two Methodists, one Congregational and the Episcopalian. Of sixteen structures, nine churches (or halls) showed some semblance of their former state, being capable of rehabilitation for worship. In every case of course the actual membership was little more than a roll—if indeed the roll continued to exist. When the first fortnight of rest centres and aid work was over these remaining men faced the problem of the future. By some it was realised at once that now was the opportunity for an oecumenical witness: if it could not be made there and then it was doubtful if it would actually be made anywhere at any time. Two members of Community were asked to assist and the following principles adopted:

1. That there be a united witness made by such churches as were members of the Faith and Order Movement and who cared to co-operate.

2. That there be no attempt to merge but that each should loyally recognise that all had a peculiar treasure to be laid by all together on a common altar.

3. That the whole area be divided into spheres of ministration (plotted round each of the still upstanding buildings) to be visited door to door by the denomination that worshipped in the building.

4. That a common Church house be set up for the collation of information and at the service of the whole community.

5. That a weekly meeting of prayer and conference take place at which each denomination be informed of such of their flock as were discovered in the visitation.

6. That all non-churchgoers be invited to the church of their ministration district, provided always they were invited as to a branch of the Universal Church and be informed of the meaning of this united witness.

7. That open air meetings at the dinner hour be conducted outside the works gates by the collaborating ministers as a group.

8. That the civic authorities give weekly intimation of newcomers.

The problem of Church authority was given consideration. It was obvious that to obtain the official imprimatur of all the Church Courts concerned before instituting the experiment would be to face a delay beyond the bounds of the practical (one denomination could not even have raised the issue in a constituted court till six months later and it was doubtful if any Church could give full answer within a year). The time for action, if the deep religious concern moving through thousands of homes (not least those of non-churchgoers) was adequately to be met, was there and then. Not in contempt of Church authority but in response to a missionary challenge that it is the primary duty of every true Church to accept, it was decided to proceed. The thief had come in the night: it was now or never. None of the ministers within the Faith and Order Movement stood out from the experiment.

Preliminary results have exceeded all expectations. Hundreds of homes have been visited: information constantly exchanged : in this week of writing a united service is being held in the largest remaining national Church—at the usual Sunday hour—attended by four denominations (the principle of worship being not the discovering of the lowest common denominator but rather the highest common factor of each denomination's cultus): and to-day, as instance, the united group of ministers addressed upwards of four hundred men, who stood steady and asked serious questions for three quarters of an hour at the dinner hour, and a smaller evening gathering lasting two and a half hours, both at open air stances. In house after house of churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike the common question is why this did not happen long ago: while dozens of sincere expressions of good will have been received from the Roman Catholic laity. That problems remain, and are likely to increase, goes without saying. But to those who have had some part in this united witness it is inconceivable that, when a new town rises based on a unified plan in material things, the churches concerned should degenerate into disrelated chaos in spiritual things.

THE LOCAL CONGREGATION AS THE REDEEMED COMMUNITY

If the first experiment here recorded is in some response to the demand of the Oxford Conference that the Larger Church should set her house in order, the other two are tentative movements conceived to meet another challenge in the same report where it reads . . . "at periods of transition . . . there is peculiar opportunity for groups of Christians to experiment along possible lines of advance in community life." For some fulfilment of this recommendation readers are advised to obtain the last edition of *Community in Britain*.¹ where account is given of some sixty experiments, in varying degrees of intensity, that have been launched in recent years to seek amelioration from the pressures of disintegrating society. It is in no spirit of criticism but with some concern that it will be discovered that the large majority of these are outside the organised Church. If we can afford to use the word heresy without any personal opprobrium being attached, a warning may well be issued. It is a truism that a heresy is an essential truth of the Faith which has become over-emphasised through the neglect of the Church vitally to preach it in its proper setting. The rapid growth of spiritualism, for instance, might in some degree be accounted for by the failure of the Church to preach with full vitality the Communion of Saints. The extension of Christian Science in the nineteenth century, by the same token, might be explained by the blindness of the Church to the power of the Spirit over the physical body. And, for our own day, if many more "communities" break out beyond the confines of the Church, the question may arise whether a new heresy is in our midst—due to the Church's blindness to the power of the Spirit over the body politic. Books in plenty are now at our disposal depicting the local congregation as the primary unit of the Redeemed Community: less manifest are actual congregations reflecting the picture. Here most speedily what the schools are now agreed on should find its incarnation in the market-place. Indeed the essential mystery is why the vision tarries. May it be because, borne down by the complexities of our social and economic life, congregations feel they must change everything before it is much worth while to change anything?

The two experiments—that here can be no more than touched on—might come as some encouragement that one can in fact change a little at a time.

A CONGREGATIONAL MESSAGE OF FRIENDSHIP

If a local unit would begin to feel the throb of new community life let them at least find a lump in which they can work consciously as leaven. Let a parish church intensively regard at least the immediate streets that surround its spire: ask the congregation to go out two by two, men to men, women to women and youth to youth not merely in survey of the district but in assurance of friendship. To judge by several such experiments in which the Community has assisted in differently placed parishes, it may be reckoned not only that about a quarter of the live membership will immediately respond (including not a few who before had never uttered) but that there will come eventually within the fold roughly the number that go forth. A parish sending out a hundred and forty visitors brought in a similar increase of membership within the year: another sending out its seventy had Scripture equally fulfilled: both experiments taking place since war began. Such however is but one of the dividends. To proffer fellowship is itself to create fellowship and the place becomes alive with questions as to what really the Church has to offer, with demands for clearer teaching of our doctrine, and discussions as to how to make more relevant our worship to those who would come in. It is also to increase our liabilities, for conflict soon arises between the earnest who went out joined with the earnest who came in regarding the temperature of Faith of those who lie between! Indeed from such experiments our present unexpected occupation is to devise some means whereby the early volunteers should first extend a message of friendship to their fellow members on the roll till the general temperature is heightened sufficiently to make missionary excursion less likely to cause disturbance. Anyway, liabilities are the normal stock in trade of every living business: or we misread St. Paul's Epistles.

AN EXPERIMENT ONE STAGE FURTHER ON

If the above experiment can immediately be made by any Christian group who would discover something of the secret of Community, a further step must still be taken—in the appropriate places—if the Church would claim to draw level with some of the uncovenanted and courageous adventures that shame us in *Community in Britain*. Here be it said in honesty that this

¹ 2s. from the Hon. Sec. Community Service, Chancton, Dartnell Park, West Byfleet, Surrey.

experiment has not yet got beyond our bulky sokop file (" Sounds O.K. on Paper "). But with so many small communities making resolute economic demands upon their members is there not place for an experiment in " Ecclesia " of similar intensity? The appropriate place would be some down town area still highly populated; centred in a set of Church buildings that is imminently for sale to a picture house circuit or a furniture storehouse as soon as the military move out. (Some erstwhile centre of the Christian Faith which by reason of the movement of its original congregation to the suburbs, has more and more approximated to the nature of a Confucian temple: a decreasing membership somehow continuing to worship at less and less regular intervals at the tomb of their ancestors.) Such places are by no means rare and are likely to increase. Is it too much to hope that in such a place an experiment might soon be made starting with just such a tiny coterie of pledged members as *Community in Britain* appears able to gather? Say the minister and his wife, a school teacher, a professional family, some like-minded craftsmen—perhaps twenty in all. Let them commence with a minimum economic demand of a tenth of their income in the common pool, to cement their purpose. Let the " small hall " be their sufficient place of worship: keep the Church (to hold eight hundred) securely locked in the meantime: and turn the large hall into an adequate restaurant for the district. In time of war we count it obvious to get beside the soldier by serving his canteen. Why not, in days of peace, get similarly beside him with his wife and growing children, through a community restaurant that is community in truth. Then move out to make our contacts in the district by the constant stories that we listen to, there at the common table. Let us serve the district once again as parish Churches used to do with no other motive than the love of Christ: and let a common Table be our place of introduction appropriate to this day when man's last material problem is how to share his bread.

One might hazard the hope that were it done the small hall would soon be hardly adequate to the attending congregation: the tithe would still remain the economic bond of fellowship of all who would come fully in: and an ever growing band, indigenous to the district, enlisted to serve the surrounding streets. Here indeed the Church might be seen once more as the Redeemed Community. *Community in Britain* would have achieved its purpose: the Church enriched by a heresy plucked in bud and grafted back. And a new vantage point would be gained from which to view more clearly the next step forward for the Church in her relationship to our economic-conscious world.

Yours sincerely,

George Thackeray

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